



Connecticut Farm Bureau Association

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February 18, 2014

Testimony in Opposition to:

Senate Bill No. 00032 AN ACT CONCERNING WORKING FAMILIES' WAGES.

House Bill No. 05066 AN ACT CONCERNING CERTAIN WORKERS' RIGHTS TO COLLECTIVELY BARGAIN.

Submitted by: Henry N. Talmage, Executive Director, Connecticut Farm Bureau Association

The following testimony is submitted on behalf of the Connecticut Farm Bureau, a statewide nonprofit membership organization of 5,000 families dedicated to farming and the future of Connecticut agriculture.

Senator Osten, Representative Turcyak and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the 5,000 members of The Connecticut Farm Bureau I wish to raise our opposition to Senate Bill 00032 and specifically the provision to increase in the minimum wage beyond what was already passed last session and in opposition to House Bill 05066 which would remove a longstanding exemption for collective bargaining of agricultural workers.

Connecticut agriculture is a \$3.5 billion industry contributing over 20,000 jobs to the state's economy according to a 2010 University of Connecticut study. I am proud to serve as Co-chair of the Governor's Council for Agricultural Development. There continues to be significant interest in local food and farm products and the Council is focusing on the potential for growth in agriculture as a legitimate economic development strategy. Over the past three years the council has carefully examined the challenges and opportunities of increasing the amount of food produced and consumed in CT from less than 2 1/2% to 5% by 2020. Hundreds of producers, buyers, consumers, local food advocates and other key stakeholders were interviewed and asked to list the top 4 opportunities and the top 4 obstacles to the growth of CT agriculture. The number one obstacle to growth was input costs and especially the cost of labor and energy. Farm Credit East (the primary farm lending institution in New England) published a report in 2011 titled *Northeast Agriculture and Farm Labor*. The report showed that CT currently has the third highest farm labor costs per \$100 of farm sales in the nation and has the highest in all of New England and the Northeast. In fact Connecticut's farm labor cost of \$27 per \$100 of sales is three times the national average and more than double that of Vermont. This was BEFORE the implementation of the increases passed last year.

Senate Bill No. 00032 would continue to increase the minimum wage beyond the increases passed last legislative session. If passed and implemented our minimum wage rate will have increased by over 26% from 2009. (Be assured CT farmers have not realized a 26% increase in price for the products they sell.) All CT farmers would be impacted because of the inflationary effect the minimum wage has on other wages. With the increase in specialization and value-added agriculture payroll is often the largest single expense for our growers. Many of our producers compete directly with growers from neighboring Northeast states and other low-cost areas from around the world. Further raising the minimum wage would put our producers at

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an even greater competitive disadvantage. Our farmers cannot simply raise prices and hope to be competitive.

House Bill No. 05066 has the potential to add significant costs to CT farmers through collective bargaining arrangements that farmers in other states and regions do not have. Most CT farmers have a difficult time finding enough workers to fill their often seasonal positions. This is true even during times of record high unemployment. Some farmers utilize the Federal H2A agricultural guest worker program for seasonal workers which is administered by both the Federal and State Departments of labor. These programs contain specific requirements that protect workers and provide for typically higher wages and safe and fair working conditions. Other farmers not using H2A have learned that in order to attract and retain good local workers they often need to pay higher rates, provide additional benefits and favorable working conditions. As a result, we believe that passage of HB No. 05066 as proposed is not justified.

The agricultural economy is especially important to our rural communities that often do not have opportunities for employment from other segments. Agriculture can play an important role in the recovery and creation of many new jobs but we need to nurture that process. We are concerned that by passing these two Bills CT will fall further behind our completion and more CT farms will be forced out of business, sold for development and lost forever. We urge their defeat.